

THE CORE

Dave Schools

Even as his band deals with their own COVID-era setbacks, the Widespread Panic bassist is aiming to add some “beauty into this chaotic world.”

By MIKE GREENHAUS

Pulling the Emergency Brake

Everybody’s the subject of their own particular PTSD after the last year and a half; I personally am not sure if I like 2021 any better than 2020. For all of us who live on the road, coming off tour is like a plane coming in for a landing. We see that there’s going to be some time off, we adjust our speed and, hopefully, we land smoothly. And even if landing at home after a tour hasn’t always been the smoothest experience for all of us, at least there’s still usually been some planning involved. You’re ready for it. Maybe you’ve got a vacation or a side-project lined up. But this was like pulling the emergency brake on a subway train. It was tough.

So coming back [to rehearse with Widespread Panic] was fantastic. And, to finally reconvene after a year plus—not just in Athens, but actually onstage at the Georgia Theater—was really cool. It was like going home; Sunny [Ortiz] still lives there so he was at home. It had been years since we played the Georgia Theatre, and we set up in a circle and started going at it. We put together these little mini sets and just worked through the songs. And, when we’d hit some bumps, we’d go back and work on what happened.

The first day, I remember thinking to myself: “Man, we sound like a really crappy cover band of ourselves.” And, by the end of the second day and the start of the third day, we sounded like a pretty well-oiled tribute band. I kept thinking, “The guy doing the JB role, he’s



doing a pretty good job.” And then, by the time we got out to The Mission Ballroom for our Tunes for Tots show, we were all dialed in. We did a couple of rehearsals there and had a shaman from South Dakota come and bless us because the proceeds from the show were going to support music education on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

He came down from one of the poorest counties in the United States with some of his kids and gave a little speech about how important music is to the Native American high schoolers that he works with. That tied a bow on everything. To roll into the first show back—being able to give back in a big way and remind ourselves of this different point of view—really highlighted the fellowship of music. And then, of course, *bam*—we went into Red Rocks. It rained the whole time and people said, “That was the best rain I’ve ever stood through.” It was like a cosmic cleanse.

Unshackled and Free

The importance of being back wasn’t lost on us. I can guarantee you that everybody was feeling unshackled and really free, and it showed in the music. There were some chances taken and, though not every bridge was crossed successfully, that’s the point of the kind of music we play.

We lost a few people—Danny [Hutchens], Todd Nance—during the pandemic. And, at Red Rocks, we had a chance to honor those loved ones that we lost—that were a big part of our musical legacy. We didn’t want to do a whole set of Todd Nance songs because, just like with Mike Houser, everything we play is, in part, dedicated to him. It wouldn’t be there without his input. But Danny was different because he was somebody we worshipped as a songwriter. We shared a rehearsal space with Bloodkin and White Buffalo back in the old days. We played parties together; we started

little splinter projects together. Danny wrote “Makes Sense to Me” for us and then we cherry-picked other stuff he wrote that we dug. So to have the opportunity to do an entire set of Danny and Eric [Carter] songs at Red Rocks was cathartic. Most of the songs were already part of our set and we really enjoyed playing the new ones; “Trashy” has already been played again and “Mercy Train to Bogart” will probably find its way back into a setlist again, too. John Bell loves singing the words to “Trashy.” So there was a lot of

transmutation going on at those Red Rocks shows.

Parsing the Science

[When we first got back on the road], there wasn’t really any good guidance coming down about what should and could be done [to stop the spread of COVID]. We were sort of left on our own to parse the science and, luckily, we have friends at the CDC. Both [tour manager] Steve Lopez and Mike Smith, our production manager, are now COVID compliance officers. Our Red Rocks shows were outdoors, and we were running our protocols. The Mission Ballroom was tougher; people tried to sneak in [without proof of vaccination]. We are really trying to make these things as safe for everyone as possible, but you just can’t prevent some things from happening and, this summer, [John Bell tested positive for COVID]. Thankfully, JB and everyone else who got positive results were only

mildly ill, symptomatically. But we got into Austin, and we had to shut down and disappoint a lot of people.

We've thought long and hard about that and what we can do to prevent that—our protocols have since been absorbed by or mirrored by larger acts. I was just talking to Bob Weir the other day and they are beating the odds incredibly on the Dead & Company tour. They're taking the strictest of protocols and notching things up even farther.

It's about statistics and viral load and there are a lot of unknown variables coming in; it's still novel. No one really knows how to do anything, especially when a new variant comes along and stifles whatever we had gathered knowledge-wise.

Unplanned Staycation

The best part of the last year or so for me has been doing all the things I felt like I finally had time to do at home and throwing down some roots. Yes, I did get out the breadmaker machine my mom gave me for Christmas 10 years ago and made some bread. I learned to cook better than I ever have before. The Neal Casal project [*Highway Butterfly*] was ongoing and, as regions began to unfreeze, artists like Warren Haynes grabbed Joey Russo and Danny Louis and managed to get some stuff recorded; The Terrapin Family Band sent their track around the country to where everyone was stationed. But there was a lot of walking the dog and trying to just be comfortable, though this unplanned staycation can be weird.

Before March 2020, with all that rushing around I was doing, I was really considering taking a six-month break from everything except for Panic. It's been a long five or six years. And, oddly, the lockdown didn't really serve that purpose. The crazy lifestyle of flying from here to there to do recording projects and play Panic shows now seems outrageously exhausting and I don't think I want to go back to it. So I'm looking forward to not doing much of anything right now. One of my favorite engineers

and I are taking over a studio that's four miles from my house. We're going to call it Spacecamp; it's where we've been doing all the heavy lifting and editing and mixing on this Farmer Dave record that I've been working on. We are bringing in Bob Matthews' console. [The longtime Grateful Dead "recordingist" passed away in September, shortly after this interview took place.] To be able to go in there and work until 2 a.m. and *still* be at the front door of my house within five minutes of finishing up is pretty incredible. I just drive past a couple of vineyards and through a few apple orchards.

We're starting a 501(c)(3) and using part of our time to get musical assets into the hands and minds of kids whose music programs have been stripped. I really want to get John and Steve Kimock in there and let them just sit in this peaceful place and compose. If I can play some bass, that's great. I want to get Scott Law down there; I want to get Billy Strings in there with just an acoustic guitar. I want to create a spot where artists can be themselves and trade those artists some recording time in exchange for the creation of some assets for these programs we're considering. My main goal, going forward, is giving back—putting beauty into this chaotic world.

Going from Zero to 60

As far as Panic goes, our [touring plan] was working and everyone was really happy with it. We'll do an incursion into a territory we love, and we'll just spend three or four nights there playing music at a venue that we love. There's no six-eight weeks on the road—no buses and weird hotels. And we are going to get back to that through the virus. But, when I think about all the traveling that I did in early 2020, my head starts to spin. People often ask, "How'd you guys ever do 250 shows a year?" And the answer is that it didn't start that way; we worked up to it. We started playing in Athens and then around Athens and then South Carolina and Macon, Ga., and Asheville, N.C., and the

spiral went ever outward. What was surprisingly hard was going from 60 to zero. It almost feels easier going from zero to 60.

However, one of the things that always served us from having those long tours was writing songs. Different individuals would work on some new ideas at home and bring the sparks for these new songs on the road. And then, the next thing you knew, soundchecks had become writing sessions—something might just sort of randomly pop out during a show in Des Moines and become a new song. Now, we have to give a little more attention to that discussion. It was the same with the Bloodkin set. Though eight of the 10 songs were standards, we needed to refract those new songs through the lens of the group.

It takes more than sitting down with a piece of paper in front of you. So, the question is: "Do we either repeat songs more quickly so they get their sea legs or perfunctorily perform them?" which none of us want to do. Now, it takes a little more time to work on those new songs.

We did go to John Keane's and spend a couple days recording. We got a few ideas down, and we've been doing that over the last few years; we had a day off in Nashville and we went to House of Blues Studio to record a few ideas. So stuff's coming together. I don't know if we'll get a chance to get comfortable enough to actually play this stuff onstage before we get to record and mix it for real. I love trial by fire, it's my favorite thing. But, at the same time—as a studio rat—I also love sort of working behind closed doors and seeing what works.

The Urgency of These Young Men

[Our first album, 1988's] *Space Wrangler* went indie-label gold. It was incredible. It was original music and people were eating it up. So we were being courted by a lot of labels, one of which was SPK, who had C+C Music Factory, Wilson Phillips and the soundtrack for *Teenage Mutant Ninja*

Turtles. They wanted demos and, when we delivered them, they were like, "Why does this song have a really long, composed guitar solo in the middle?" And we were like, "That's what we do. Did you not listen to our first record?" There were other labels interested and their contracts were ridiculous so we were just sort of in limbo.

But, we were still working on new songs and playing them live, so we were like, "Let's just go into John Keane's studio and keep recording." He was just so great with us—such a dry, sarcastic, loving and stern mentor. We didn't have a keyboard player yet, but we had Tim White play some organ on the first record. We had also done a lot of gigs with Phish and were pretty friendly with all those guys, so we looked at their schedule and they had a day off in the area, and Page [McConnell] agreed to come over. So we piled into a truck, saw a Phish show at the Pterodactyl Club in Charlotte, grabbed Page and some kind of keyboard and rolled around the back of this truck all the way to John Keane's.

The recordings got out and were pretty popular on the bootleg circuit but, when John moved studios, he started going through his vaults and found the actual two-inch reels. So he sent them off to Sonic Solutions, they baked and transferred the tapes, John remixed them, we had it all remastered and Kindercore did a fantastic vinyl pressing. We used Barbette Houser's original artwork that Capricorn rejected for the "Mom's Kitchen" record and are calling it *Miss Kitty's Lounge* because a lot of the material was either on "Mom's Kitchen" or was stuff that didn't make "Mom's Kitchen." If you know Athens, then you know that Mom's Kitchen was a soul food restaurant in this little strip mall, and the place next door to Mom's Kitchen was called Miss Kitty's Lounge. JB wrote some liner notes, and I listened to the test pressing—the urgency of these young men, trying to maintain inertia really struck me. 🍌